

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction. Capitalism and its pre-capitalist heritage

PAT THANE and GEOFFREY CROSSICK

These essays have been gathered together as a tribute to Eric Hobsbawm on his retirement from his chair at Birkbeck College. The problems involved in compiling a collection that was necessarily limited in size yet also thematically coherent will be obvious to anyone familiar with the diversity of his work and influence, and they are indeed further testimony to both. His work has ranged widely in time, though lying mainly in the period from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries; in subject matter, from jazz to the Fabians;¹ and in geographical scope. Those who have been influenced, inspired, or personally and generously helped by him are similarly various in intellectual, geographical and age range. The choice of contributors and of topics was therefore unusually difficult, though much assisted by the simultaneous plans for a complementary volume edited by Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, which enabled more people to express their appreciation of Eric Hobsbawm and his work than would otherwise have been possible.

In selecting a theme we chose what appears to us to be the central theme of much of his work. This was the dialectical relationship between capitalism and its pre-capitalist heritage; what is revolutionized or what is adapted or rejected from the older societies in the process of transition to full industrial capitalism; the process by which, within certain limits, the pre-capitalist heritage shapes and informs economic, social, political and cultural change among all social groups, and within the society as a whole. All of the essays in this collection bear upon this theme, with the exception of Eugene Genovese's introductory assessment of Eric Hobsbawm's work. Most of them were discussed at a conference held at King's College, Cambridge in July 1982.

It is not our concern, nor that of our contributors, to draw up a balance sheet of what does and what does not change over time. Still less are we pursuing the now fashionable, but in our view questionable, strategy in historical writing of emphasizing the continuities in historical experience, playing down the significance and the effect of change and discontinuities in the past. To do so would

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Pat Thane and Geoffrey Crossick

provide a strange tribute indeed to a historian whose most widely read book is *The Age of Revolution*. Our concern is rather to explore the intensely complex nature of the process of change during the growth of industrial capitalism; in particular the ways in which older social, economic, political and cultural forms – whether they be structures, institutions, movements, ideologies, rituals, vocabulary – help to shape the new, and in that process find themselves reshaped. A new type of society did not spring up fully formed in the nineteenth century, relatively untouched by the past; nor was what remained of the old society mere vestigial survivals, but active agents, and not necessarily agents of progress. As several of these essays stress – particularly those by Kocka, Price, and Harris and Thane – historians have often worked with models of change inherited from Marx, the classical economists and classic social theorists, which all assumed a greater rapidity and totality of change than appears to have occurred. One consequence has been an excessive stress on the role of new groups – the factory proletariat and the industrial bourgeoisie in particular – in creating the new society, with a resulting neglect of such supposedly declining groups as the landed aristocracy and craft workers who loom so large in this book.

A fuller and more accurate assessment of the process of change requires that we free ourselves from rigid presuppositions, categories and concepts, from narrow conceptions of the nature and purpose of history, and from romantic interpretations of it. As Genovese points out, freedom from these constraints has characterized Eric Hobsbawm's own work and has been perhaps his greatest influence. For Hobsbawm, the historian's role is to contribute to the writing of that 'history of society' which is no compartmentalized 'social history' abstracted from the history of power, politics or economics, but quite the reverse. The 'history of society' must attempt to integrate historical inquiry, to seek out the complex relations among these separate but associated processes, in pursuit of the central issue of how power, in all its dimensions, is constructed, maintained and exercised in any given society, or in any set of international relationships.

The essays in this volume reveal such concerns and approaches. They all contribute to the organizing theme, but they do so across a range of different issues now regarded as important by historians. One of Eric Hobsbawm's great achievements lies in his contribution to that broadening of the concerns of historians and, more significantly, to the elaboration of the way these concerns fit together in a more integrated and more creative historical analysis. Some central interests of recent historical writing flow from this, and they are important elements within this book. There is, at the outset, the recognition that change since the late eighteenth century has been complex and by no means unilinear, and that groups once thought simply to have 'declined', notably artisans and landed aristocrats, have played formative roles within it. The precise nature of these roles is now being explored: that of artisans in shaping the culture, ideology

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

and organizations of the developing working class; whether aristocracies have indeed, as has been recently argued, maintained hegemony over European bourgeoisies and hence, presumably, over everyone else. This implies close attention to the subtle forces shaping classes; to their composition; their experiences and the ideas, vocabulary and ritual through which they sought to make sense of them; and the meaning and explanation of those ideologies, including many once dismissed as 'utopian' (such as co-operativism) or underestimated (such as nationalism); and to those forces which may fragment them internally, perhaps with disabling results.

Maurice Agulhon opens by analysing the process whereby working-class identity and solidarity were created out of the great variety of material and cultural experiences of the working population in different trades, whether in the home, workshop, fields or factory. He shows how the leading role in the formation of a distinctive ideology and forms of organization in France in the decades before 1848 was taken not by classic factory proletarians, but by craft workers in old-established but changing trades. Work and sociability intertwine as he reconstructs the process whereby material circumstances and custom brought them together in the workshop, the lodging house, the café, in associations devoted to leisure or to mutual support. Political ideas and action grew out of institutions initially and perhaps primarily devised for sociability; institutions that grew fast during the July Monarchy, in part as the people emulated the bourgeois associational model; and it was the discussions and conversations built around the sociability of daily life that sharpened the discovery of shared needs and grievances. Consciousness and organization thus grew not only from economic and political experiences but through the development of patterns of social behaviour which helped to shape the content, the language and the form of political and economic aspirations and action. Chief among these aspirations was that for a democratic republic of mutually supportive co-operative workshops. Agulhon helps us to comprehend the passionate defence of the democratic and social republic.

Agulhon raises a theme explored more fully by Joan Scott: the fact that for Parisian tailors of the 1830s and 1840s proletarianization meant not the move to the factory, but being forced from the relative independence of the workshop to the sweated labour of the whole family in the home. Indeed, she adds to the increasing realization that the family work unit cannot be seen simplistically as something displaced by industrialization. Amongst Parisian tailors it was no inheritance from the past, destined for destruction, but in many small-scale trades the creation of nineteenth-century industrialization. Family production was an area into which many retreated as they struggled to cope with the economic difficulties created by the capitalist transformation of small-scale production. Scott's discussion of an experience which stretched through much of Europe in these decades enables her to draw together two themes so often

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Pat Thane and Geoffrey Crossick

separated, those of labour history and of gender and work. She demonstrates how the experiences of the family in relation to work shaped workers' economic and social ideals in a manner which did not consign work, family, leisure, politics and culture to separate and unrelated spheres of existence. This conception of life, both real and ideal, as an indivisible and non-alienated totality was – as Kocka, Price, Perrot and Kaplan all in different ways suggest – central to the worldview, the 'moral economy' of artisans and other labouring people in Western Europe in early industrialization. Artisanal ideals and culture developed in part as a reaction to proletarianization, but they were more precisely about the way that process of subordination to the forces of capital was experienced as a challenge and an affront to expectations and cultures of daily life that found their roots in older ideals of independence, morality and community. That is why so many of the workers' movements and activities discussed in the early essays here were essentially popular, drawing on a wider world of the ordinary people that would include many not strictly wage earners, those producers and traders who complete the social world of the European urban working class for a good part of the nineteenth century. The transition from communal to class solidarities was no sudden one. The ambiguities remain as late as the periods examined by Perrot and Kaplan.

Scott also demonstrates how the reform strategies of male and female workers – tailors and seamstresses – differed as a result not only of their different work experiences but of long-established gender distinctions, in their beliefs about the relationship between work, home and family. In spite of such differences, however, they united on a common conception of a co-operativist form of social, political and economic organization which incorporated a conception of family roles quite distinct from prevalent bourgeois conceptions of the family (above all in the belief that mothers had a right to as well as a need for paid employment, but in non-exploitative conditions which made adequate provision for child care), which were appropriate for their needs, as bourgeois family ideals were not, and which were, in principle, capable of realization. They did not represent a mere nostalgic clinging to the past but were proposals for a different and better future, developed out of the way present experience was interpreted and understood through long-held notions and ideals.

In the later nineteenth century, as Scott points out, both male and female French workers did seek to consign mothers to a separate social sphere, free from paid work. This process must be related, in as yet insufficiently explored ways, to a wider splintering of the artisan economy (with its assumptions of morality and regulation) with the advance of industrial capitalism, a theme also referred to in different contexts by Kocka and Price. The importance of the artisan experience in the formation of the working class and its ideology is well established in the historiography of France, where large-scale industry developed late and slowly,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

and where the egalitarian rhetoric of a victorious revolution offered a vocabulary to artisan protest, while the structures and assumptions of a corporatist past gave it a moral and associationist critique of the present.

Jürgen Kocka points out that the similar role of journeymen and other handworkers in the cultural and political organizations of the German working class in the 1830s and 1840s and in the trade unions and socialist organizations of the 1860s and 1870s has been overlooked. He argues that, as in France and Britain, their role must not be seen as a simple matter of the protests of a declining economic group against the engulfing tide of industrialization, protests rooted in long-established craft guilds. In fact, in Germany as elsewhere, the numbers of workshop-based independent craftsmen expanded alongside and in close association with the growth of factories, though not without themselves changing. Their movements were not primarily defensive, but constituted a highly developed if ultimately unsuccessful offensive against the ideology and institutions of industrial capitalism. This alternative artisan moral economy was, as in France, essentially co-operativist and as critical of narrowly defensive and divisive artisan traditions and strategies as of capitalist social, political and economic relations. German journeymen in particular had little reason for enthusiasm for the survivals of the old guild structure which functioned to conserve the authority and privileges of masters against themselves. Kocka sums up his interpretation, in asserting that 'it was not only, perhaps not even primarily, the conflict between capital and labour... which produced those challenges, frictions, frustrations and propensity to protest out of which the early working-class movement grew, but also, more importantly, the conflict between the traditional culture and capitalist modernization'. Although they might not all agree with the firmness of Kocka's order of priority there, the theme and the reinterpretation connect with those of Agulhon, Scott and Price here, as well as those of others outside this volume. Early labour protest was fuelled by fury against the offence to family life, to patterns of leisure as well as of work organization, but above all to the artisan's sense of independence, the desire to control his or her own life, which capitalism meant to working people; offences the more resented because they could envisage an alternative way forward which could conserve all that they valued whilst extending it and benefiting from new forces of production, but whose realization was endlessly frustrated. This alternative has been dismissed as 'utopian' or 'immature' because its origins and meaning have been misunderstood, but it served, for a while at least, to unite workers across boundaries of gender, trade and region, a unity which underpinned later, different movements. Not, of course, all or even most workers; Kocka points out that some trades were changed too little, others too much (to the point of destruction) to play a significant part in the process. For those which did, artisan traditions facilitated common action even where formalized

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Pat Thane and Geoffrey Crossick

institutions did not exist. Journeymen of the same trade often maintained contact with one another beyond local boundaries, facilitated by their tradition of mobility, their shared trade-specific symbols and rites, qualifications and work experiences, benefit societies, shared language and loyalties.

If in this sense and by all these means the working class was 'made' in Western Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was, as Kocka, Scott and also Price suggest, united by a moral economy which could not retain its coherence against an assault determined to splinter the social, economic and political spheres. However, the sense of artisan independence long continued to shape the actions of labouring people. This is the theme of Richard Price's discussion of the English working class, in which he explores more fully than other contributors the dynamics of the contest for cultural and economic control between 'master' and 'servant', as they were designated by English labour law until the 1870s, at which point they became, significantly, 'employer' and 'workman'.

Price stresses the key role in British industrial production of craftsmen working in small units. They too experienced industrial capitalism as not just an assault upon their working lives but upon their entire culture, as employers recognized as clearly as they that work did not occupy a distinct social space and that habits of work were indissolubly linked with those of home and leisure; hence to establish work and time discipline they had also to control non-work time and its uses, establish a hegemony beyond the workplace, discipline workers to value higher incomes above longer leisure (whether drinking, family time or whatever), to abandon the old culture for a new. In Britain, Price argues, this was a longer and slower struggle than elsewhere, and fluctuating and uneven in its outcome. However, its very length in association with the slow development of British capitalism enabled British craft workers to establish a degree of autonomy in the workplace, which they were able to transpose to new structures of work as they developed, and which shaped and limited the techniques of control available to employers. It was and remained a struggle over independence, which Price describes as 'the key concept of a heightened and more unitary working-class consciousness'. An early outcome in England, as elsewhere (not explored by Price), was co-operativism, but again one of the victories of capitalism was to force the division of economic, political and cultural struggles so that in Britain by the 1870s 'industrial conflicts began to be conceptualized as economic struggles for rewards', which may have divided craft from craft more in Britain than in Germany. Kocka points out the greater craft exclusiveness of British unions compared with those of Germany in the later nineteenth century, as Price in his turn emphasizes the greater strength of craft autonomy in Britain, which has survived profoundly to influence the later history of British industrial relations and the British labour movement.

Both these essays uncover the importance of the craft tradition – whether

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

embodied in corporate structures or more informal traditions of 'the trade' – in shaping the developing working-class movements of nineteenth-century Europe. German master artisans reaffirmed the authority and the corporate controls of the craft guilds in 1848, while their British counterparts had for twenty years or more been detaching themselves from workplace culture and artisanal traditions and expectations, thus seeking long before their journeymen to escape the influence and restrictions of the past. Here are the origins of Price's industrial conflicts over customary rights, as an expression of a fundamental rejection of processes under way in early nineteenth-century Britain. Here perhaps is one of the sources of the continuing craft traditions within British labour history.

Yet, and perhaps especially in those countries in which industrial capitalism developed more slowly, the older moral economy long retained a hold, as Michelle Perrot suggests in her study of the first May Day in France. The unifying desire of the active supporters of May Day was the 'three eights', the right to eight hours each of work, leisure and sleep, a totality each of whose elements had equal importance. She shows the remarkable extent to which this call appealed to great numbers of labouring people despite differences of region, gender, occupation and ideology, and the way their responses differed, shaped as they were by their cultural and immediate material experiences. It was not a movement based primarily on the workplace nor was it directed chiefly against employers, but was an appeal to the *state* for redress, suggestive both of the specific development of French industrial capitalism by 1890 and of the more assertive role ascribed to the French state compared with that of Britain. Is this a positive role for the state, rooted in republican memory and its symbols? The appeal was unsuccessful and Perrot's account suggests as much about the weakness and divisions among French workers as about their unity and strength.

So too does Temma Kaplan's account of the recurrent and often moving demonstrations of the working people of Barcelona against ultimately unassailable state authority. Again, the forms and language of working-class protest were, as in the first French May Day, profoundly shaped by custom – demonstrations took the paths of religious processions, workers asserted their rights through the symbolic occupation of public space, spurred by offences against popular morality as well as by claims against repression and for improved conditions. She shows how the popular cultures of urban life, and also the more community-based and even elite-based rituals, became a complicated means of popular resistance to oppression and repression. Shared traditions were a force for unity amongst otherwise disparate groups; the meaning of ritual could change in response to new experiences and thus new needs, but through its familiar form people could comprehend the meaning of action without the need to make it explicit. Kaplan stresses that that was all the more important when overt opposition was impossible.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Pat Thane and Geoffrey Crossick

This issue of the force of culture and custom is a central theme of the book. In part it demonstrates the use of older rituals and forms for new struggles, and the way the use of the old form gives shape to the meaning of the new struggle. Culture is not just a medium. Can customary expression act in essentially conservative ways, holding people in older frameworks of social analysis and understanding? Many of the essays in this book show the ambiguities of the relationship. Indeed, since Joan Scott can show how the response of French working women when faced with economic pressures was more creative about social relationships than was the response of men, could part of the explanation not lie in the absence of the older craft corporatist assumptions that shaped so much of French (male) artisans' responses? Perrot tells us most here about the power of ritual and custom. She shows how nineteenth-century socialists were anxious to create a new ritual, but did so by drawing on an older, a much older, vocabulary of visual and verbal symbols, and added to it the idea of the great day of manifestations, whose roots in the *journées* of the Revolutions gave added force to ruling-class fears. Fêtes and festivals thus were a powerful language, given meaning by the symbols that were used. May Day was to supplant the 14th of July, the workers' republic was to be asserted, and as she shows, at Doyet-Les-Mines the interweaving of working-class consciousness and republican faith showed how impossible are such absolute transformations of symbol and expression.

The mobilization of working people in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe to maintain or achieve some independence within states, economic systems, and indeed cultures that were dominated by others is impressive, and its dynamics important, but by whom they were dominated and by what means is more often assumed than analysed. If artisans and their experiences played a more central role in shaping the modern working class than was long thought, 'pre-industrial' landed aristocracies showed no greater enthusiasm for the grave to which Marx and many classical economists too enthusiastically assigned them. A central theme in the history of industrial capitalism is what Peter Hanak describes as 'the adaptability of ruling elites'. As F.M.L. Thompson shows, great landowners played an essential role in its economic development, and there is a revived fashion for asserting their continued pre-eminence in the political, administrative and cultural life of industrial Britain, to a point at which they are claimed to have maintained hegemony over the bourgeoisie and thus over society as a whole. Of course, their immense wealth and power at the outset of industrialization gave them enormous opportunities which were exploited to the full by many, but they were themselves changed by the experience. It is quite wrong to think in terms of an 'aristocratic tradition', pickled and preserved through the upheavals of the nineteenth century. Certain rituals and poses were retained – robes, titles, an appearance of 'amateurism', an overt disdain for 'trade', and of course landownership itself – but these were now kept not as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

empty traditions but because they served new functions in maintaining the landowners' changed role in changed societies.

As Harris and Thane argue, although the aristocracy and their descendants retained much power they not only shaped but were changed by their relations with other classes and by their involvement in new forms of activity, so that by 1914 a great hereditary landowner in Britain or elsewhere had more in common with a banker or a steelmaster than with his *ancien régime* ancestor. He was not entirely transformed, and he was still well aware of the ways in which he differed from such wealthy bourgeois, but this is not the central issue. That is the matter of whether landowners as a group wielded power commensurate with that of their ancestors, politically, economically or socially. They plainly did not, though they retained more in some countries than in others. Similarly in relation to the European bankers with whom Harris and Thane maintain a running comparison with aristocrats: if they had ever been the dependent servants of courts and nobles in early modern Europe (and that is doubtful), they changed their economic and political character in the course of industrialization as emphatically as did the aristocrats with whom they so frequently mixed. This chapter reminds us of the distorting effects of that revisionism in historical writing which sees the only alternative to transformation as the continuity of old patterns. The precise relationships between and within landowning and bourgeois groups and of both to states – which Genovese rightly describes as ‘not a mere reflex of class interest... a political centre with considerable autonomy and yet ultimately compelled to act in the interests of the propertied class’ – remain even less understood than the relationships and the divisions within the populace and the working class.

One source of division at all levels of society was religion and ethnicity, which Peter Hanak introduces in his study of the Jews of Austria-Hungary. Here the universal European experience of an interpenetration of old landowning and new business and professional elites – a process fraught with tension – was fundamentally influenced by the fact that the latter were overwhelmingly Jews of recent migration. Comparisons between the experiences of Western and East-Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have to be treated with care, in view of the profound differences between the societies in which capitalism expanded fastest and which were mostly independent liberal democracies, and that combination of failing imperial power, dependent status and weak peripheral economies described by Berend, which characterized Central and Eastern Europe. Yet Hanak's description of the processes whereby the Jews' own culture (whose homogeneity he rightly questions) gave shape to their behaviour and environment, and was in turn changed by it, as they to varying degrees assimilated to those sectors of the host societies which were, however ambiguously, most prepared to receive them and whose values were closest to their own, is a study of the complex interplay of tradition and change whose

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27527-9 - The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm

Edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Pat Thane and Geoffrey Crossick

significance goes beyond his immediate subject. Indeed, the study of cultural and ethnic assimilation is almost a perfect case of the analytical theme of this collection, for it involves the dialectical relationship between historical forces (economic life, culture, social and demographic structures, religion) each of which are changed, and continue to be changed, by the very process of interaction that the historian is exploring and calls assimilation. Hanak's argument is of further interest, for his description of the 'assimilation to the nobility in public and preservation of the bourgeois in business and Jewish culture in private life' of successful Central European Jews is a further thrust against those who would simplify aristocratic-bourgeois relations in recent history.

Another and far more tragic one is the all too evident fact that the Jews of East and Central Europe never assimilated so successfully as to be simply accepted, nor did the old elites maintain sufficiently confident authority to accept them. Amid the upheavals and misery of Central and Eastern Europe during and after World War I, as Iván Berend describes, the old elites could hold on strongly enough to defeat the forces of revolution from below, but not to subdue them entirely or to retain power on the old basis in a radically changed political world and a deteriorating economic situation. This could only be done by a new kind of movement which drew upon both the old and the new, which could feed off widely held grievances and ideals – against the excesses of failed capitalism, yet also against the destructive forces of class conflict, above all for a unifying and restoring nationalism. Fascism proved itself as capable as any movement of mobilizing and transforming long-held sentiment, symbol and ritual in the forging of a spirit of unity.

Berend's comments upon the drive in the countries of East and Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s to throw off their peripheral political and economic status, and the national movements that resulted have a certain contemporary relevance, as obviously does Maczak's concluding piece. His description of how certain economic structures and cultural responses may have survived through six hundred years of change in Polish history, though with profoundly altered meaning and content for rulers and ruled, both bears upon the central theme of the volume and is a suitable note on which to conclude a tribute to a historian whose history and politics have never been dissociated.

NOTE

- 1 See Keith McClelland, 'Bibliography of the writings of Eric Hobsbawm', in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Politics. Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (London 1982), pp. 332–63.